



Mesothelioma rate alarmingly high

By Matthew Bunk, Western News Reporter

A "universally fatal" cancer that normally strikes "one in a million" is running rampant in Libby, an Environmental Protection Agency official reported in a May 2 memo.

The rare disease, called mesothelioma, appears in one per thousand Libby area residents, more than 100 times the national average, EPA Region 8 Administrator Jack McGraw reported in the memo to the Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

What appears to be 23 cases of mesothelioma have origins in Libby, confirmed Paul Peronard, an EPA on-site coordinator in Libby.

Often referred to as "meso," the malignant form of the disease shows up as tumors in the chest cavity or abdominal lining. Not much is known about meso because it afflicts so few people, and therefore is difficult to study, said Dr. Brad Black, Lincoln County health officer.

"There is no cure," Black said. "It is universally fatal."

The EPA is basing the total on the diagnoses of local and regional doctors. However, some of the cases may have been counted multiple times if two or more doctors diagnosed the same patient, Peronard said.

"Some of these may overlap," Peronard said. "What we've got is a rough tally from a few doctors."

However, the relatively small population of Lincoln County makes logging an exact number a moot point, Peronard said. In fact, more than one case of meso in a populace comparable to Lincoln County - the 2000 census showed fewer than 19,000 residents - is an oddity.

"If it's 18, 26 or 23, it all means the same thing," he said. "If there were two cases in Lincoln County it would be horrendous. The numbers we expect is about one in a million, so two in Lincoln County would be statistically huge."

Doctors have linked the outbreak to asbestos exposure, which in Libby is usually associated with the now-defunct vermiculite mine that operated here for about 70 years. W.R. Grace operated it from 1963-1990.

Mine workers and their families were exposed to deadly tremolite asbestos fibers through contact with the vermiculite ore and mine tailings, a waste product. The EPA has announced that everyone living in Libby for more than a year prior to 1990 is at risk of asbestos-related disease.

Black is aware of six meso patients diagnosed in Libby in the past two years. He said four cases, all non-occupational exposure types, are still living in Libby. He emphasized that none of those four meso patients worked at the vermiculite mine.

"What's important here is that all four are non-occupational exposures," he said.

Peronard also discussed the number of mesothelioma cases at a Community Advisory Group meeting Thursday. A majority of the CAG board and those in the crowd indicated they were not aware of the estimated 23 cases in this community.

"I want to know who knew about this, and I want to know why no one was told," demanded Clinton Maynard.

Peronard announced that it definitely was not meant to be a secret.

Furthermore, it has been widespread public knowledge that this community has an abnormally high meso rate, Black said. Reported or not, sometimes those facts slip by unnoticed, he said.

"I don't care about the number 23," Black said. "We know it's 100 times as prevalent here, that's been known for some time."

There quite possibly are 23 cases, though, said Black, who called the estimate "legitimate."

"I think it's easy to say we've had 23 cases," he said. "It's just extremely difficult to get full records from the past."

More than 100 cases of meso have been diagnosed across Montana dating back to 1978, according to Dr. Mike Spence, the state medical officer.

Statistically, there should only be one case of meso, if that, in Montana, which has a total population of just more than 902,300.

Right now, it seems five to eight times what would be expected, Spence said at the May 16 CAG meeting, adding that there may be others that went unreported or undiagnosed.

"Whatever we find, I think it's safe to say this is the minimum number of cases," he said.

Spence said no direct occupational connection has been researched or discovered between meso patients and vermiculite mining in Libby.

But there is a link between asbestos exposure and the rare cancer, Black said.

"We don't know of any cause other than asbestos exposure," Black said. "Does (asbestos) cause every case of mesothelioma? We don't know.

"But if (meso) shows up in someone, your first thought is asbestos."